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Law and structure in Dilthey's philosophy of history

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ABSTRACT

This paper interprets Dilthey's treatment of history and historical science through his engagement with Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy. It focuses on Dilthey's account of the possibility of objectivity in the *Geisteswissenschaften*. It finds in Dilthey a view of history as a law-governed, dynamical structure expressing the totality of human life, cast in a reworked Hegelian notion of objective spirit. The aim of historical thought is to understand the unity of this structure to the greatest extent possible, and thereby to understand lived experience itself. Dilthey's epistemological standpoint recommends beginning with concrete studies in the special human sciences, and working toward a more general representation of the regularities and patterns in the historical record.

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1. Introduction

'Philosophy of history' might seem like a misnomer when applied to Wilhelm Dilthey's views on historical knowledge. In both *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883; henceforth, *Introduction*) and *Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910; henceforth, *Formation*) Dilthey uses the label to criticize metaphysical reconstructions of human history. In *Introduction* he objects that:

philosophy of history, instead of making use of the methods of historical analysis [...] persists in using general notions that either condense an overall impression of the course of world history into something like an essence, or project such a condensed image on the basis of a general metaphysical principle.

(GS 1.98; SW I.147)

Dilthey attributes this error both to idealist philosophers of history, such as Schelling or Hegel, and to naturalists such as Comte or Spencer. Accordingly, he has been seen as replacing philosophy of history with a mere 'theory of

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history'. The latter should be content to find meaning in particular socio-historical phenomena while eschewing the search for ultimate purposes in history (SW III.7).

Whether inquiry into the meaning of particular human activities without consideration of their place in the whole is a coherent project is, *prima facie*, an open question, one with which Dilthey himself struggled. In *Formation*, especially, he seems to undercut his earlier emphasis on finding meaning in particular cultural forms (or 'productive systems') by suggesting that these must be situated in a larger scheme, declaring that, "the sense of history can only be sought in the meaning-relation of all the productive forces that have been woven into the nexus of the ages" (GS VII.187; SW III.208). In other words, the meaning of the Reformation or of Impressionism, say, should be located in a framework of world history. Unsurprisingly, some commentators have taken such remarks to express a deep, even irreconcilable, tension in Dilthey's thought.¹ By what right could he advance a universalizing conception of history, resembling the speculative metaphysics he rejects, given his insistence that the proper objects of historical inquiry are only the particular cultural formations studied in the special human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)? What entitles him to posit a 'nexus of the ages' as the ultimate bearer of historical meaning?²

The tension is closely tied to Dilthey's much-discussed struggles with the problem of relativism.³ For present purposes, relativism is the view that there are no universal truths or values in history, and thus no universal truths or values to be discovered through its systematic study. In what follows, I do not directly address the problem of relativism, which Dilthey repeatedly disavowed as a fair interpretation of his views. Instead, I focus on the related question of objectivity in history: how "universally valid knowledge of the historical world is possible on the basis of the given" (GS VII.152; SW III.174). My aim is to understand the terrain Dilthey highlights as the legitimate object of historical science. This terrain is common to *Introduction* and *Formation*; indeed, Dilthey glosses the later work as a continuation of the earlier. In both he presents a structuralist view of history. The historical world as it appears in the systematic study of human deeds is a purposive, interconnected, and dynamical system of cultural forms, each with its own

¹Commenting on such passages, Beiser (*German Historicist Tradition*, 362) writes: "For any careful student of Dilthey's philosophical development, his proposed solution to the problem of relativism in the *Aufbau* is nothing less than astonishing. For it is in blatant conflict with another cardinal theme of Dilthey's earlier thought: his firm rejection of philosophy of history".

²One (increasingly discredited) explanation of this textual situation, originating with the editor of *Gesammelte Schriften* volume VII, Bernard Groethuysen, periodises Dilthey into 'psychological' and 'hermeneutical' periods, with the end of the 1890s marking the break (Landgrebe, "Wilhelm Dilthey's Theorie"; Bollnow, *Dilthey*). Makkreel (*Dilthey*) and Lessing and Rodi (*Materialien*) have argued for continuity between Dilthey's allegedly 'psychological' and 'hermeneutical' periods, a thesis I assume here.

³See Beiser (*German Historicist Tradition*, 358–60) for a summary of the debate.

centre of values and meanings and yet subordinated to a common centre, that of world history. Objectivity in the *Geisteswissenschaften* requires understanding the historical world

as a productive nexus centered in itself, at the same time containing other productive systems within it, which by positing values and realising purposes also have their center within themselves. All are to be understood as structurally linked into a whole in which the sense of the nexus of the socio-historical world arises from the significance of the individual parts.

(GS VII.138; SW III.160)

For Dilthey, particular cultural forms – whether poetry, economics, or politics – express domain-specific laws, which scientists of those forms aim to describe. The task of the philosophical historian is to reflect on the various forms of human activity for the sake of a deeper understanding of their common source in human thought and action. To that end, she posits history in the large as the carrier of whatever meanings have been expressed in the course of human affairs. Guided by present interests, Dilthey's historian seeks to understand the purposive interconnectedness of the products of objective spirit, or culture, and is thus led to regard history as an ideal unity, though always from her own historically conditioned standpoint.⁴

I approach Dilthey as a philosopher of history in much the same sense as one might treat a Neo-Kantian such as Natorp or Cassirer as a philosopher of science.⁵ Dilthey takes himself to advance a metaphysics of history just as little as Natorp wishes to offer a metaphysics of nature. Instead, each begins with the actual achievements of certain sciences and works toward an understanding of the aims and objects of those sciences. Neither Dilthey nor Natorp is under the illusion that a proper understanding of nineteenth-century human or physical sciences would reveal the ultimate truth about history or nature. But they are also united in dismissing the charge that an epistemology that takes the historical or natural sciences as its basis is therefore vulnerable to a fatal skepticism and relativism. Dilthey's philosophy of the *Geisteswissenschaften* aims to be as realist as Natorp's philosophy of the exact sciences. Each takes history and nature respectively to be an intersubjective domain of objects about which more or less can be learned depending on the methods applied.

⁴In this regard, I disagree with, for instance, Owensby (*Narrative of History*, 119–20), Makkreel (*Dilthey*, 308), and Bambach (*Crisis of Historicism*, 162n106), who take Dilthey's appropriation of Hegel's notion of objective spirit to refer merely to the plurality of cultural products, which provides a meaning-frame-work but does not imply any internal unity, or as a broad shift from a 'metaphysical' to a 'hermeneutical' concept. I see Dilthey as rightly appreciating the instability of such a view, and as using his reworked Hegelian concept for a more constructive role in his theory.

⁵For recent reconsiderations of Dilthey as a philosopher of science, see the collection of essays in Damböck and Lessing (*Dilthey als Wissenschaftsphilosoph*). This strand of scholarship represents a break from the dominant stream of Dilthey studies, which has focused on his significance for later phenomenology and hermeneutics. Without wishing to dismiss that tradition, I am more interested in reading Dilthey in dialogue with his nineteenth-century contemporaries.

Section Two traces the origin of the tension between universalist and particularist conceptions of history in Dilthey's criticisms of his predecessors. This tension is philosophically valuable, inasmuch as he uses it to identify the delicate middle ground he wishes to occupy. In Section Three I consider Dilthey's and his Neo-Kantian contemporaries' relation to the German idealist tradition. In that light, Section Four turns to Dilthey's reconfiguration of Hegel's notion of objective spirit for his own end, namely to understand the relation between historical science and history as such. Section Five fills out that relation and examines the tensions, some of which remain unresolved, in Dilthey's philosophy of historical science.

2. Between idealism and materialism

Characteristic of Dilthey's method is the identification of conceptual spaces and problems by narrating their histories. In both *Introduction* and *Formation*, he frames his task by assessing the merits and limitations of earlier philosophies of history.

In *Introduction* Dilthey attacks two prominent nineteenth-century currents: idealist philosophy of history and positivist sociology. He charges each with having given free rein to speculation. The historical approach Dilthey associates with Hegel, Schelling, or Schleiermacher errs by subordinating the facts of history to a transcendent idea on the basis of what Dilthey calls "creative intuition". By interpreting historical facts in terms of their significance for spirit's consciousness of its freedom (Hegel), or for reason's shaping of nature (Schleiermacher), these thinkers reduce the world "to a non-spatial, non-temporal subject, like the Mothers to whom Faust descends" (GS I.104; SW I.153–4). Positivist sociology, which seeks general, quantitative laws of human behaviour, likewise rests on unfounded speculations. Chief among its errors is the unprovable assumption that psychological states are exclusively conditioned by physiological ones, and the false one that reliable introspective access to psychological states is impossible (GS I.106; SW I.155). The positivist project of understanding history entirely by means of studying what nature has made of the human species rests, for Dilthey, on "a confused and indeterminate general representation abstracted from a mere survey of the nexus of history" (GS I.107; SW I.156).⁶

⁶Positivism and sociology are complicated labels in the nineteenth-century context. In *Introduction* Dilthey specifically targets the French school associated with Comte, for trying to found a single science of all human culture. But elsewhere he also criticizes more limited projects closer to home in Berlin, such as Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*, Georg Simmel's sociology, the physical anthropology of Rudolf Virchow and Adolf Bastian that favored material over textual evidence, and mechanistic approaches to psychology going back to Johann Friedrich Herbart. See Feest ("Hypotheses, Everywhere Only Hypotheses!") for interrelations between Dilthey's objections to some of these movements, specifically for mistakenly relying on the explanatory framework of the physical sciences. Dilthey was sympathetic to the antispeculative motivations of naturalistic currents in history, anthropology, psychology, and sociology, and actively engaged them by contributing, for instance, to Lazarus and

Similar opinions reappear in *Formation*. Dilthey criticizes Hegel for having “intellectualized the historical world” with his conception of world history as a progress toward the realization of a system of ideas (GS VII.100–1; SW III.122–3). The critique of the naturalist schools persists as well (GS VII.111; SW III.134). The common failing of both idealist and materialist philosophies of history, on Dilthey’s diagnosis, consists in privileging a metaphysical intuition of history’s value over the particularity of events and actors. Idealists undermine the facticity of history by interpreting past events in terms of transcendent ideas. Materialists fail in equal measure by supposing that the meanings of historical events can be reduced to regularities in social behaviour (GS VII.116–7; SW III.138–9).

These opinions stand in tension with what Dilthey says on other occasions, especially in the last chapter of *Formation*. In the same breath in which he criticizes Hegel and Comte, Dilthey appears to undermine his own stance by suggesting that the historian’s task is to seek what is “ever present and recurring in its [i.e. history’s] structural relations”, and to “demonstrate these regularities in the structure of the historical world” (GS VII.172–3; SW III.191). He even speculates about a specific shape of world history, a cyclical one: “It is possible to delineate within the course of history, time spans in which a basic disposition of life and the highest ideas come together, reach a peak, only to disperse again” (GS VII.185; SW III.206). And he claims that the solution to the “problem of the sense and meaning of history” lies in the way “ages and epochs are centered in themselves” (GS VII.185–6; SW III.206). One is left with the impression that the task of Diltheyan history is to identify patterns amidst the stream of cultural phenomena; to show that these are grounded in general principles; in order to describe the abstract structure of processes which drives history forward; and ultimately to show the overall shape of the past. One might be forgiven for reading such passages as belonging to the metaphysical traditions in philosophy of history.

The challenge to historicist thinking arising from the tension between historical particularity and universal validity preoccupied the later Dilthey. The evaluation of his (proto)-hermeneutical and (proto)-phenomenological approach in dealing with this antithesis also shaped much of his legacy, beginning with Husserl, Gadamer, and Heidegger.⁷ Here, by contrast,

Steithal’s *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie*. Yet he remained sceptical of their positivist understandings of science, which perhaps partly accounts for some of his affinities with the neo-Kantians, who were similarly suspicious of such tendencies. Space considerations prevent me from pursuing these angles here in detail.

⁷See Grondin (“Dilthey’s Hermeneutics”) for a recent assessment of Dilthey’s reception in Heidegger and Gadamer. Dilthey’s image as a “classic of hermeneutics” set the stage for much twentieth-century Dilthey scholarship, which sought to understand his complex influence on subsequent developments in philosophical hermeneutics. Dilthey’s hermeneutics, however, grew out of the humanist tradition of textual criticism. Forster (“Dilthey’s Importance for Hermeneutics”) details some respects in which Dilthey’s understanding of hermeneutics remained closer to the traditional one of a science of

instead of looking forward to Dilthey's reception in the twentieth-century, I propose to examine his views on history and historical science by looking back to the nineteenth. In that context, Dilthey's writings, if not always his claims about his writings, betray certain affinities with the collection of movements known as 'Neo-Kantianism'. Before turning to my reading of Dilthey, a word concerning his relation to this historiographical category is in order.

3. Dilthey and Neo-Kantianism

Concerning the label 'Kantianism', Lembeck observes that, if by that term

is meant a literal follower of Kant, then there has hardly been a single 'Kantian' in the history of philosophy. But if the title alludes to Kant-reception in a wider sense, then indeed the entire nineteenth-century and even a large part of the twentieth [is] Kantianism.

("Kantianismus oder Neukantianismus", 1)

Dilthey's indebtedness to Kant is uncontroversial. He advertises his lifelong project in deliberately Kantian guise as a 'critique of historical reason'. He also borrows, much to Heidegger's lament, the language of Kant's epistemology of a disembodied spectator, and shares Kant's motive of raising scientific knowledge to universal validity. That he nevertheless often disagrees with Kant simply testifies to his sincere engagement with a thinker he found philosophically worthy.

In recent decades, scholars have revisited Dilthey's engagement with Neo-Kantianism.⁸ Lessing ("Dilthey und Helmholtz", 820) has persuasively made the case for seeing Helmholtz, one of the founders of the 'back-to-Kant' movement, as among Dilthey's key interlocutors during the 1880s and 1890s. Helmholtz exemplifies for Dilthey the ideal of an empiricist philosophy of the sort he wishes to bring to the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Like many of his contemporaries, Dilthey shares crucial metaphilosophical commitments self-consciously taken from Kant. To that extent, he fits the category of 'Neo-Kantianism' as an historian's label, useful for examining texts within an intellectual current, even if he defies 'Neo-Kantianism' as an actors' category applicable to authors, such as Natorp or Windelband, who self-identified with the movement.

Certainly, Dilthey publicly distanced himself from the growing dominance of Neo-Kantianism in German universities by the turn of the century. His various disagreements with his peers are profound. He charges the Marburg school with defending too-intellectualist an epistemology by denying any role for psychological analysis (e.g. GS V.148–9; SW II.124). His

interpreting texts. See Bulhof (*Hermeneutic Approach*) for a systematic reading of Dilthey oriented around philological senses of hermeneutics.

⁸Besides Lembeck, see Damböck ("Epistemische Ideale"), and Orth ("Wissenschaftskonzeption"). See Makkeel ("Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians") for an earlier but still illuminating discussion of the topic.

dispute with Windelband of the Southwest school rests on a rejection of the latter's sharp distinction between the methodologies of the natural and the human sciences (e.g. GS V.256–7; SW II.225–6). Dilthey is consistently at odds with 'party-line' Neo-Kantians, as he seems to have regarded those who formed themselves into schools. But while he resists assimilation to any of the historically actual varieties of Neo-Kantianism in turn-of-the-century Germany, he fits, not uncomfortably, a broader tendency among his contemporaries to temper the perceived excesses of nineteenth-century philosophy with insights of Kantian provenance. In particular, he shares with the Neo-Kantians a new conception of the object of philosophy:

There is one domain that undeniably belongs to philosophy. If the individual sciences have divided up among themselves the realm of the given actual world so that each treats of a particular part, there then arises a new realm: *these sciences themselves*.

(GS V.357; SW VI.190)

Amid the growing dissatisfaction with speculative philosophies, Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians conceive the distinctive character of philosophy as a 'theory of theories'.

Neo-Kantianism's struggle with German idealism brings us to a recurring tension in the movement: its grudging but often inexorable approach to idealism's most distinguished representative, Hegel. In their efforts to philosophize with Kant by going beyond him, as Windelband famously expressed the spirit of Neo-Kantianism, many authors found themselves landing in close proximity to Hegel. Beiser notes the "sweet irony" in the later Windelband's embrace of Hegel's insight that history itself discloses the normative principles of reason, given his – as well as his ageing Neo-Kantian peers' – earlier, fervent criticisms of Hegelian philosophy of history (*Genesis of Neo-Kantianism*, 511). The later Cassirer openly went beyond his Marburg roots in declaring Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* the basis for his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. The decline of Neo-Kantianism as a self-conscious movement was marked as much by a moderation of its youthful antipathy toward Hegel as by the rise of phenomenology, hermeneutics, or, for that matter, logical positivism.

To some degree, Dilthey shares this fate with his Neo-Kantian contemporaries. Unlike them, however, his disavowal of scholastic camps permits him, without unintended irony, to engage Hegel much as he engages Kant, as a worthy interlocutor for the articulation of his own views, but as neither a philosophical touchstone nor an adversary. The key Hegelian notion Dilthey appropriates to understand the task of historical science is that of objective spirit.

4. Dilthey on objective spirit

For Hegel, objective spirit denotes a stage in the movement from subjective to absolute spirit. Very briefly, Hegel's doctrine of subjective spirit considers the

embodied human being as characterized by a suite of psychological powers including sensation, desire, feeling, and reason. It treats the psychological functions that make up embodied minds. The outward expressions of these functions in communal life give rise to what Hegel calls objective spirit. This is the norm-governed, socio-cultural domain resulting from human activities. Spirit is objective in the social world, insofar as the latter is the objectification of the interests, drives, and motives of a community of human agents. Objective spirit is realized in the normative patterns of social interaction, from family to civil society to the state, and defines the study of practical rationality in law, morality, and social ethics. Finally, absolute spirit designates the stage in which spirit knows its own essence through its externalizations. It is humanity reflecting on its collective deeds in the socio-historical world and coming to recognize a state of rational freedom as its essential aim. The sciences of absolute spirit include art, religion, and philosophy. These seek to capture the ideal expressions of an infinite spirit, and thus invariably aspire to a perspective beyond the objectifications of finite beings in the actual historical world. For Hegel, one must indeed begin with concrete historical experience, as Dilthey praises him for having done (GS VII.149; SW III.170). Yet, it is also the case that, for Hegel, the highest task of thought, one which would culminate in a metaphysics of absolute spirit, is to understand history as essentially driven forward by a noetic, conceptual scheme.⁹

The transition from objective to absolute spirit requires moving from social ethics to the philosophy of world-history (*Weltgeschichte*). A philosophical perspective on history emerges with the recognition that actual history must express the progress of rationality. In the Introduction (1830–31) to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel writes: “The sole thought that [philosophy] brings with it [i.e. to the study of history] is the simple conception of reason – the thought that reason governs the world, and that therefore world history is a rational process” (GW 18.140). The insight that world history constitutes a rational process is, for Hegel, not a presupposition (*Voraussetzung*), but rather proved by “speculative cognition” (*spekulative Erkenntnis*). Philosophical history isolates those moments from the historical manifold that best exhibit the movement of spirit toward the realization of its essence, namely of its freedom taken as infinite.¹⁰ Thus, while Hegel’s world history begins from historical fact, it inevitably leaves the details behind in its quest for what an ideal rational agent would will to result from the course of history.

In *Formation*, Dilthey embraces Hegel’s term ‘objective spirit’ as “an insightful and happy coinage” (GS VII.148; SW III.170). He uses the term to designate

⁹See Düsing (*Problem der Subjektivität*, 189–208) for Hegel’s idea of speculative dialectic as constituting a metaphysics of absolute subjectivity. There is, of course, lots to be said about Hegel’s doctrine of spirit. I have only sketched in briefest outline what is of relevance for understanding Dilthey.

¹⁰See Pinkard (*Does History Make Sense?*, 41–5) for discussion of Hegel’s notion of freedom considered as an infinite end.

the totality of expressions of human activity, or what he calls the objectifications of life – from basic forms of social organization to transnational institutions, from personal diaries to literary movements. But he also marks systematic differences between his concept of objective spirit and Hegel's. For one thing, Dilthey contests Hegel's transition from objective to absolute spirit. Whereas for Hegel, art, religion, and philosophy aspire to disclose the pure rational essence of human spirit in its progress toward freedom, for Dilthey even these practices, like the sciences of society, are always delimited by historical fact.

For another, Dilthey has a more restricted view of reason's autonomy compared to Hegel. Characteristic of Dilthey's thought is the view that cognitive functions – conception, judgement, and inference – are just one among three equal aspects of human nature, alongside feeling and willing. Among the tasks of his descriptive psychology is to understand how “the intellect, the life of feelings and instincts, and the activity of the will” are connected together, such that they jointly produce the expressions of lived experience (GS V.176–7; SW II.150–1). None of the three sets of functions has a greater claim over the others in constituting the ‘essence’ of human nature. If anything could be said to occupy the role of the traditional notion of human essence, it could only be life in its totality. This has consequences for the task of philosophy. Insofar as the object of philosophy in the widest sense is lived experience, Dilthey argues that, “a real, natural epistemology” must situate the intellectual functions within the structure of all the functions of life, a task he assigns to descriptive psychology (GS XIX343; SW II.68). Thus, Dilthey famously restricts the scope of the Kantian notion of ‘critique’ by declaring that, “we cannot bring life before the tribunal of reason” (GS VII.261; SW III.280).

Accordingly, in contrast to Hegel, Dilthey understands the products of objective spirit as expressions of three kinds of life-functions at once. What is rational in its objectifications cannot be elevated above the non-rational, without distorting the expression of lived experience (*Erlebnisausdruck*). Unlike a failure of fit between proposition and judgement, the distortion of lived experience is not that of taking the true to be false, or vice versa. Instead, the distortion consists in a kind of self-deception. Metaphysical philosophies of history engage in a certain insincerity inasmuch as they take a subset of the expressions of human life to fully represent the human spirit. Having once misrepresented the object of knowledge, their claims to explain history inevitably fail. To depict, say, the sequence of events leading from the Reformation to the Enlightenment as essentially the rise of individual self-consciousness and the progressive recognition of the modern state as the form of the community in which the ethical nature of humanity is to be realized, is to avert one's eyes from the irrational, freedom-curtailling forces in the same nature, and their contributions in shaping modernity. The mistake of

idealist history lies not exactly in a falsification of the past, but in a one-sided account of its meaning for the present. As Dilthey puts it in “Life and Cognition”: “Thought, if it is honest, tells us nothing more than what we know when we live” (GS XIX.347; SW II.72). Rationalist philosophies of history fail by not taking into account the totality of human experience (GS VII.150; SW III.172).

Dilthey must not be counted among superficial readers of Hegel, who dismiss his philosophical history as an imposition of arbitrary categories onto historical fact. What he objects to is Hegel’s optimism that the philosopher could step outside the stream of history in which she is embedded and reconstruct it as the pure expression of absolute spirit. In denying Hegel’s transition, Dilthey affirms his own conviction that the standpoint of the historian is always conditioned by her own historical context, a thesis he defends at length in the *Weltanschauungslehre*. The cultural situatedness of every attempt to make sense of history gives rise to the problem of objectivity in historical knowledge, to which *Formation* is Dilthey’s considered response. Already in *Weltanschauungslehre*, he conveys both the problem arising from restricting historical reflection to the products of objective spirit and the prospects for its resolution: “Every worldview is historically conditioned, thus limited, relative [...] But the very historical consciousness that has brought forth this absolute doubt is also capable of determining its limits” (GS VIII.224).¹¹

For Dilthey, the rejection of the standpoint of absolute spirit gains justification by its fruitfulness. Once we stop seeing history primarily as the vehicle of reason’s self-realization, the domain of objective spirit can be widened to include “language, custom, every form and style of life, as well as family, civil society, state, and law” (GS VII.151; SW III.173). With Dilthey’s modified concept of objective spirit, the materials available for inquiry extend to shared realities of everyday life, beyond those codified in legal and civil institutions. This broader field makes possible an advance in the human sciences comparable to the natural sciences, and is reflected in the branching off of special disciplines engaged in more precise studies of narrower domains of experience. Indeed, for Dilthey, it is only by replacing universal reason with “life in its totality” that the idea of “scientific history” as a distinct enterprise first emerges (GS VII.151–2; SW III.173–4).¹² Hegel’s identification of world-spirit with its effects in nature, in society, and finally with speculative philosophy, leaves no room for a conception of historical science as an empirical discipline, one that, for instance, could be subject to recalcitrant evidence,

¹¹See Kinzel (“Ahistorical Core”) for a careful treatment of Dilthey’s (and Windelband’s) attempts to protect historicism from the threat of relativism.

¹²To be fair, Hegel would deny the distinction between philosophy (or metaphysics) and science. For him, the scientific and the metaphysical are synonymous, designating that which “is accomplished solely by means of thoughts” (*Science of Logic*, GW 21.48).

or could be challenged by theories or narratives developed in the special human sciences. Dilthey's concept of objective spirit sets a high bar for universal validity in historical science by recognizing the limits of intelligibility in the historical record. But, through just such a delimitation of the historical horizon by the character of human life, it also makes history possible as a science.

5. Historical science and history

What then are the aims and objects of historical understanding, for Dilthey? Briefly, Diltheyan history seeks to articulate the structure of objective spirit by means of its cultural expressions. This structure is gleaned from the concrete records human actors have left behind – records as varied as poetry, court proceedings, accounts books, and musical compositions. Accordingly, Dilthey's historian draws on research in the special human sciences – literary criticism, jurisprudence, economics, musicology – in order to understand general tendencies of the human spirit. History, like descriptive psychology, is a more fundamental human science inasmuch as it aims to understand how meaning results from the intersections of different kinds of human activity. Dilthey's guiding idea is that an empirically based inquiry into general structures and lawlike order in history is a coherent philosophical project in itself. Scientific history need not be beholden to metaphysics of history any more than scientific physics needs validation from speculative cosmology.

For Dilthey, structure is, in the first instance, a psychological notion of that which connects the elements of lived experience into a whole. It is “the connectedness of this whole [of life] as conditioned by real relation of concern about the external world” (GS VII.238; SW III.257). The structure of lived experience also provides the point of departure for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, inasmuch as human agents shape the external world by acting upon it and being affected by it. As the object of these sciences, the socio-historical world is the intersubjectively available expression of human spirit, as the outward expression of its totality of thoughts, motives, and feelings. The historical record thus provides the material for meaning-making, or of human beings' discursive understanding of their own deeds: “history is everywhere that life has been and is becoming intelligible” (GS VII.255; SW III.274).

To the extent that life is intelligible, it is articulated in distinct patterns of shared experience, which Dilthey calls productive systems (*Wirkungszusammenhänge*). These include all the cultural forms human agents occupy in common, such as religion, courts of law, and educational institutions, and through which they produce values. Each system exhibits a structural order that embeds specific purposes, values, and practices, as well as a collective memory in records and narratives. The variety of special *Geisteswissenschaften* reflects in part the variety of human activities that have left sufficiently deep

traces in cultural history to withstand separate analysis. Part of the goal of humanistic studies is to grasp what persists as relatively fixed among those traces. Dilthey takes it to be uncontroversial that at least part of the sociologist's, or legal scholar's, or economist's endeavour consists in understanding the inter-generationally stable patterns and norms that particular kinds of institutions exhibit. It is not just social scientists, as we would call them, who aim at this kind of understanding. The literary theorist or the art critic equally seeks to understand her object by conceiving it in terms of movements and styles, and anchoring these to wider cultural patterns of an age.

For Dilthey, the particular human sciences supply materials for historical science writ large: "All of history is about comprehending productive systems. The historian penetrates more deeply into the structure of the historical world by differentiating specific productive systems and studying their life" (GS VII.246; SW III.265). As Makkreel ("Dilthey's Conception of Purposiveness", 31–5) notes, Dilthey's notion of *Wirkungszusammenhang* exhibits what Kant calls immanent purposiveness. Across generations, economic systems and literary movements, for instance appear as self-organizing and self-replicating systems, expressing internal values and ends guiding their development. The special human sciences aim to grasp the norm-giving principles of each system to the extent possible. Thus, Dilthey is comfortable speaking of laws in particular domains, even of "laws of poetical composition" (GS VII.156; SW III.178). The larger framework of history becomes necessary, however, because such purposive cultural systems invariably intersect. The resulting formations of any time period, thus, cannot be adequately captured from the standpoint of merely economic life, or of merely literary life, even though each provides an authentic, partial perspective.

This circumstance presents the further task of historical science, namely to understand how the intersections of productive systems give rise to larger patterns of meaning. Carried out to completion, such an inquiry would reflect the totality of lived experience, for "history is merely life apprehended from the perspective of the whole of humanity conceived as interconnected" (GS VII.256; SW III.275). In *Formation*, Dilthey makes bold and, to many readers, unsettling claims about the goals of historical science:

The enduring efficacy of general structural relationships is what above all produces the meaning and sense of history for us [...] Our task is to study systematically and from the ground up the regularities that exhibit the structure of a productive system in its carriers, starting with individuals and moving upwards. The extent to which these structural laws enable us to make predictions about the future can be determined only when this foundation has been laid. What is immutable and regular in historical processes is the first object of study, and conditions the answer to all questions about progress in history and about the direction in which human life is moving.

(GS VII.185; SW III.206)

Not only must the philosopher of the *Geisteswissenschaften* focus on structural invariants in history, she must do so for the sake of addressing questions about the overall progress and direction of humanity. Not unlike Hegel or Comte, Dilthey here seems to conceive the object of history at a high level of generality. To make sense of history seems to require elevating thought to the kind of standpoint occupied by Hegel's absolute spirit.

Dilthey further encourages such suspicions with his ambivalent invocation of laws in the socio-historical world. In the above-quoted passage, he suggests that the general structural relationships are governed by "structural laws" (*Strukturgesetze*), which might even turn out to be predictive. And in later drafts, he describes spirit as "the product of the lawful dynamics of the social world" (GS VII.271; SW III.289; see also GS V.7, SW IV.387).¹³ Such remarks sit uncomfortably with other opinions in the same work. He denies, for instance, that either lived experience or how we understand it presents a system of law-governed objects in the manner of the natural sciences (GS VII.159; SW III.180). He likewise denies that any law of development can be found in the course of history as a whole; all that is left is to study productive systems separately (GS VII.169; SW III.190).

Some commentators have emphasized the more straightforward fit between the latter set of passages and Dilthey's interest in distancing the *Geisteswissenschaften* from the natural sciences on the one hand and from metaphysics on the other. Thus, Bulhof (*Hermeneutic Approach*, 184) regards Dilthey as having "taken a major step toward the disintegration of the Enlightenment notion of a developmental universal history", and as anticipating Weber, Spengler, or Foucault in treating history as a discontinuous "amalgam of cultures and epochs". Makkreel (*Dilthey*, 314–6) takes a more qualified view, recognizing alongside Dilthey's rejection of determinate historical laws that he "does not rule out the possibility of historical explanation altogether". But he too grants only a limited scope to construction and explanation in particular systems, so that any general application of an explanatory framework to history can only be analogical.

Dilthey's insistence on lawlike order in the historical world is closely bound up with his notion of structure. Structure denotes a diachronically stable system of relations. Any such system is aptly described in lawlike form, to the extent that its dynamical evolution exhibits regular patterns of succession. Lawlike form expresses both the unity of structural elements and the possibility, however limited, of explaining change. For an object to be intelligible at all, it must have the form of a law-governed structure in general. For Dilthey, lawfulness is a condition of objective validity in the given, thus also

¹³These passages from *Formation* do not reflect a new development. Already in his 1862 review of Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England*, despite criticizing the author for treating history as a science of behavioral laws, Dilthey nonetheless maintains that, "in the sphere of nature as well as in that of spirit everything happens in accordance with fixed laws" (GS XVI.103; SW IV.263).

in the socio-historical world (GS VII.332; SW III.352). In *Introduction*, he underscores the centrality of the notions of law and structure for scientific inquiry:

Every investigation must relate its subject matter (1) to the causal nexus of all the phenomena of socio-historical reality and their modifications, (2) to the universal laws that govern this reality, and (3) to the system of values and imperatives which derives from man's relation to the totality of his tasks.

(GS I.89; SW I.139)

Dilthey presents this threefold scheme as a challenge to idealist and positivist philosophies of history, as part of his argument to supplant those approaches with his own. Where metaphysical approaches to history abandon their claims to scientificity by basing explanations on speculative principles, his own epistemological standpoint better satisfies these criteria. It differs from the former in that its search for lawlike order in socio-cultural phenomena always proceeds from empirical discovery, "from the ground up", as he puts it in the passage at GS VII.185. Such discovery yields objects "of a more encompassing order", which accordingly exhibit more general structural laws (GS VII.254; SW III.273). For Dilthey, previous philosophies of history have failed adequately to "grasp the relations among historical fact, law, and the rule that guides a judgment", or between the concrete records of human life, the regular dynamical patterns these records express, and the philosophical demand to understand these from within the horizon of experience (GS I.89; SW I.139). But he does not think any alternative is entitled to shift the goalposts that define the scientific task.

Dilthey's views on scientificity also prevent him from approaching history as inherently fragmented. Just as we are not entitled to assume that history is guided by an ultimate end or a single law of progress, we are also not permitted to assume that it is a dappled mosaic. The corollary of his declaration, that thought cannot go behind life to question its ground, is that metaphysical speculation cannot go behind history to prejudice it one way or another, whether as having a fixed structure or none at all. From the experiential standpoint, however, what licenses the historian to posit connectedness in the historical manifold is the supposition that history is the outward expression of human spirit. It should thus reflect the immediately given interconnectedness of lived experience, a psychological view he develops in descriptive psychology. Meanwhile, under the general constraints of scientific method, Dilthey's historian is bound, like his psychologist, to investigate the connections among socio-historical phenomena through the only legitimate means, namely induction, analysis, construction, and comparison to evaluate historical evidence. But, once she has embraced that project, it is no longer reasonable to deny the possibility of ever-increasing unity in historical understanding, of an expanding horizon of lawlike connection among phenomena, even if it always remains, like Hegel's infinite end of freedom, incompletely actualized.

Where Dilthey explicitly rejects the possibility of a Hegelian transition from objective to absolute spirit, his idea of a 'nexus of the ages' approaches Kant's regulative idea of systematic unity, as a guide to investigating any empirical manifold. In one respect, the idea of world history plays a comparable role in Dilthey's thought, as a *focus imaginarius* embracing all socio-cultural formations. As he acknowledges in *Introduction*: "If there is a kernel of truth behind the hopes for a philosophy of history, it lies in [the ideal of] historical research based on the widest possible mastery of the particular human sciences" (GS I.94; SW I.143). Like Kant, Dilthey recognizes that, even though nothing in an empirical manifold guarantees its unity and continuity, empirical inquiry cannot coherently proceed without some such presumption.

But Dilthey's posited historical nexus differs from Kantian regulative ideas in its source, and thus in its demand. For Kant, the source of historical unity would lie in reason's idea of a maximum, and its natural quest for completeness in a series of inferential grounds. Kantian regulative ideals result from a logical demand having to do with reason's striving after the unconditioned, or a first ground that would terminate a chain of inferences. Thus, for example, the ideas of a world-whole and of the soul as a numerically identical simple substance result from a logical demand to comprehend the appearances of outer and inner sense respectively as closed series.

By contrast, for Dilthey, the presumed unity of the historical manifold originates in the character of lived experience as an immediately given whole, which displays "a connectedness of life and of history in which every part has a meaning" (GS VII.291; SW III.311). Dilthey's 'nexus of the ages' is the carrier not of a merely causal series, but of a purposive one, thus of a series of causes and effects that express values and interests. In other words, what licenses positing unity in history is not just a cognitive demand for causal or deductive closure, but instead an evaluative demand to understand human beings' relation to a socio-historical world of their own making. This living connection of the recorded past to the present gives the historical sciences their orientation. For Dilthey, the directive principles of inquiry into structural regularities in the socio-historical manifold result from a living system of values, and frame the historian's task as one of understanding how that system came to be. Diltheyan historical science is not a disinterested empirical inquiry into a dead past, but always responsive to present interests. He sums up this project in the so-called 'Berlin Plan', noting:

The study of the history of this continuous unfolding of the purposive products [*Zweckwirken*] of humanity has the task of inducing the historical consciousness of humanity out of itself, of letting the thinking spirit move back from stage to stage, so that it could enrich and fulfill the present with historical consciousness. (GS XIX.297)

Dilthey's envisioned historical science does not amount to a mere groping around among empirical facts. It requires orientational principles to guide

the historian. But these principles are different from Kantian or Hegelian ideals in their source and consequently in the kind of guidance they provide. Dilthey's departure from both idealist and materialist philosophies of history is summed up in his core historicist insight, that "we are historical beings before being observers of history, and only because we are the former do we become the latter" (GS VII.278; SW III.297–8).

The worry remains, however, that, Dilthey's framework appears more plausible as a model for an empirical science of a particular cultural system – for example, economic life or literary culture – than for understanding history in the large, or for settling questions about the overall direction of history. Present interests in understanding, say, race relations in a society, or the significance of a literary form in a language, could guide the historian's investigation sufficiently well. It remains in her power to establish facts and causal sequences as meticulously as possible, even if they persistently underdetermine her narratives and theories, a situation history shares with any other kind of inquiry. But, while Dilthey may have mitigated the methodological worry about how to purposefully navigate an ocean of details, it is far from obvious that he has left the historian with any resources to move from an understanding of particular cultural forms in one context to the course of history as such, without embracing speculative principles of the sort he emphatically rejects.

Dilthey's historicism thus meets its limits against some of his own historical questions. How ages and epochs are centred in themselves, and how the nexus of the ages is constituted, are not questions that can be decided on the basis of empirical inquiry guided by values and interests that are themselves conditioned by the socio-historical forces under investigation. In the end, Dilthey would have to concede, more clearly than he does, that questions about progress or decline in history, or about the shape of world history, designate the limits of historical knowledge. To the extent that empirically tractable structural regularities condition answers to questions about the direction of history (as Dilthey suggests at GS VII.185; SW III.206), they can only constitute partial and incomplete conditions. The historian is not prohibited from appreciating such questions. She is perhaps even compelled to entertain them by the nature of her inquiry. But she cannot answer them, at least not as a scientific historian. Yet, these very limitations of Dilthey's philosophy of history underscore its character as a philosophy of historical science, as opposed to a metaphysics of history. Where Dilthey's historian is unable to declare that history is the story of the realization of infinite freedom, she is better positioned to claim for it the status of a modern science.

6. Conclusion

Reflecting on the rise of historicism in 1903, Dilthey wrote:

The historical worldview liberates the human spirit from the last chains that natural science and philosophy have not yet broken. But where are the means to overcome the anarchy of opinions that then threatens to befall us?

(GS V.9; SW IV.389)

In the last decade of his life, Dilthey was acutely aware of the relativist challenge to his historicizing philosophy. But he was not prepared to abandon the historicist standpoint for the false comfort of speculation. *Formation* and its associated drafts represent his final attempt to articulate a scientific philosophy of history. I have argued that this consists in a view of history as a lawlike structure constituting the outward expression of human actions and passions. What human scientists aim to grasp when they reflect on the products of human motives are relatively invariant structures, which, guided by present concerns, they seek for the sake of understanding some aspect of their own communal world. For Dilthey, the further philosophical task arising from the particular human sciences requires conceding that the historical world cannot be treated as a mere aggregate of cultural systems but as an ideal unity, albeit always from a culturally situated perspective. To be sure, as is widely recognized, Dilthey rejects the view of the unity of the cultural world as the realization of a metaphysical principle, so that its products might be assessed against transhistorical norms or standards. But what is perhaps less well-appreciated is the degree to which he continues to acknowledge, not only with Kant and Hegel but also with his Neo-Kantian contemporaries, the demand for a universal history in which the plurality of expressions of human spirit could acquire further meaning. As a theory of the sciences, his historicist philosophy has the task of understanding to the greatest extent possible the interrelations among the developed objectifications of human life. Dilthey certainly recognizes limits to this project, inasmuch as he steadfastly denies that philosophical formalisms and distinctions could ever do justice to the richness of lived experience in its trial, cognitive, affective, and volitional, character. Yet, for Dilthey, abandoning the project would be worse, for it would be tantamount to surrendering to the threatened anarchy.

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